

Pioneers of Feminism and Unionism: Léa Roback and Madeleine Parent

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These transcriptions were extracted from footage shot during the filming of *A Vision in the Darkness* (1991), directed by Sophie Bissonnette.

Unionization at RCA Victor in the Neighbourhood of Saint-Henri (1941) – Léa Roback and Madeleine Parent

Sophie Bissonnette: Perhaps you could tell us a bit about your experience at RCA Victor?

Léa Roback: So, I was a member of the Communist Party. And we were told in very, very . . . as Bob Hadd said, we couldn't help but understand. "Go into the factories and organize." And I can tell you that lots of the factories became organized thanks to the young people of the Communist Party, who went there in the mornings before school and helped us hand out leaflets at the factory gates. So there, at the factory, we said, "It's not going well." We produced all sorts of documentation, but no one knew if we were going to help them organize because, let's face it, if the workers didn't want a union, there wouldn't be one. And those women were wonderful to see. And I can tell you that in Saint-Henri—Madeleine is familiar with all this—we used Imperial Tobacco as an example. It wasn't very far from RCA Victor. But there again, it was the women who were being poisoned by the tobacco and all that. But in the end, there came the union. And at Imperial Tobacco, my God, it was all about "our workers," you know. Same thing at RCA Victor, "our workers." Bah, don't go near them. So then, there was this major organizing, there was also General Steel Wares. It was . . . It was the right time, it was the right time, because people were saying, "We've had one liberation: women!" And let me tell you, it was the women! So then we started talking. And there were a lot of complaints: "Dammit, they're always on my back!" and all that. So I said to them, "Maybe if we had a union—we didn't use [the French word] *syndicat*, we said 'union.' If we had a union, I'm pretty sure things would be better, eh?" "Yeah, but they don't want one." "Yeah, but say all the rest of us wanted one, and they were forced to want one, eh?" It was very interesting that little by little . . .

And then there was Annie Ray-Rothenberg! She was . . . She was very gentle, different . . . I had a big mouth, but she was more like Madeleine. And we needed someone like that, didn't we? So we started talking about it a bit. And I, well, I went upstairs, and I carried a garment bag because at the bottom of it, I kept the pamphlets that we would hand out. We would put them on the worktables, or "Here, take this and read it during your lunch break." And on top of those, I had sanitary napkins. It was nice and full. And the guard said, "Show me your bag!" "Listen, mister, I'm polite with you, I ask you to be polite with me, also." "Oh, come on!" It was . . . So we went upstairs, and some of the guys said, "She'd better be careful." So I opened my bag, and all they saw were the sanitary napkins. And they said, "Well, you're pretty organized, aren't you? All right, go on up, then." I'm telling you, they paid very close attention!

SB: So, you were telling us how you worked . . .

LR: Right . . . So then there was the issue of, for example, when they saw me walking around too much. And personally, I didn't care. You know, we had those time studies, with timers. He wasn't very nice. I think he had done twelve lessons, then . . . Because you know, they didn't have those people. They had modernized. So we . . . They hired people from all over Canada. So that's how he came to be there. And he said, "In one hour, you've made eight." They were big radio machines, so he said, "Eight hours of work...you should be able to produce 64 a day." I said, "What's the matter with you?" He didn't speak a word of French. I said, "We get tired, too, you know." So he said, "It's the line. You can't hold up the line." And I said, "So, what if we have to go pee? We're not allowed?" And he said, "You go during your lunch break." So I said, "But what if we don't have to go at that time?" So he filed a report. And they took me off the line, took me off working with those big radios, and put me elsewhere, with the cables. And still I walked around. I didn't care about that too much. So I walked around, visiting all the departments, handing out leaflets. But for them, the kicker was when I went upstairs, to the canteen, and climbed onto the table. And I told them, "There's going to be a union meeting." We were at 40-something Saint-Antoine Street, near Saint-Philippe, and I told them to come. So they applauded. Then my friend Fritz from the police, from security . . . I wasn't allowed. "Who told you you could climb onto the table and talk to the employees about a union?" "No one! I don't need permission. I work here!" "It's not your factory!" "Well, that's too bad, isn't it?"

So we had a good turnout. It went well. People had grievances. Everyone had something to say. And so this went on for five or six months. And then one of the machinists . . . Once a month, I went and spoke to the night shift team. And he was "dear Mr. Cormier." He was a machinist and he worked the night shift. "There's no boss around to annoy us." So one morning, he came to the union, I mean our union room, and he said, "You know, Léa, it's going to be difficult. I hear the guys talk. They want someone . . . a man. We need a man for president." And he added, "You know, you two ladies do great work, it's great, but the men are starting to grumble that it's a women's union!" So I told him, "Well, we've got a few people . . ."

So Vic became our president. Vic Walker, such a nice man. So the organizing of it had worked. And when you're . . . In those days, it was an American union, of course. But it wasn't . . . They didn't know anything about the industry or the way we worked. It was all brotherhoods, people who worked for Bell or the hydro company. So we decided to tell them, "Okay, we'll be part of the union, but we'll take care of our own grievances and our own business. And we'll remit our dues, a certain percentage." And we succeeded. So little by little, the organization took off. But RCA Victor put out a flyer, "I'm the Captain of the Ship!" It was the boss. Big deal. But he didn't have a boat, I can assure you. He tried to get one built, but it didn't happen.

So it took a year before they showed up and we got a contract. But there had already been some improvements. There was the whole question of grievances. And that, you have to understand, you have to have lived it . . . It's that there was somebody there. You wrote up a grievance, and there was someone—the workshop rep, the department rep—who went and negotiated with the boss. They didn't like that. We were taking rights away from management. But you wouldn't need managers if there were no workers, would you? And we needed unions because they weren't taking the proper care themselves. For example, and this is my own experience, there was a foreman, and I had said to him . . . But before I get to that, I want to tell you something else. The superintendents, and the major foremen—because there were major and minor foremen. Well, the minor ones were French Canadians, and they had to speak English if they wanted the job. And uh . . . They

translated for the manager and the superintendent, but they weren't paid extra for that, were they? But they were the ones who wanted to be foremen, so that was their problem. But there was this. I had said . . . So, I was doing the soldering, but there was something wrong with the iron, and I kept having to start soldering again. So I told him, "Give me an iron that works." So he made a note on his cigarette pack. But of course, when the pack was empty, he threw it out. So the next day, when I arrived, I asked him, "So, what did you do about it?" "Oh! I'm glad you reminded me!" In the end, it took three weeks! So I filed a grievance. And then, "Oh! That's not fair. It's just not fair. We were going to buy her a new iron, but there's a war on. We can't get any." My eye!

So that just goes to show. And the female workers . . . You know, there were some women there . . . Jeannette Lefebvre—she's deceased now. But these things need to be written down. [Jeannette] was a nurse. A nurse. She had completed her program at Hôtel-Dieu [Hospital], but she saw that there were openings in the factories, and it wasn't a very happy time in her life. So she said to herself, "Forget about this white apron, I'll go see what I can get in the factories." She knew nothing about unions and all that, but her heart was in the right place and she was smart. So when the female workers had problems, she listened to them and she talked to them. It was wonderful to see. And that's what a lot of people don't understand, even today: Unions aren't formed by some employee saying, "Here, take these," [miming the handing out of leaflets]. Well, maybe some unions are formed that way, but . . . the strength of a union is in the energy the workers put into it. And that was . . . the activism was fantastic, those women. We said, "Let's go take a little trip, we'll go see the president. They don't want to deal with the grievances." So we went up there and we went in. "Who gave you permission to stop working?" "We did, because you don't want to deal with our grievances." So, for me, working in that factory was the equivalent of three or four years of university education.